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Viewing cable 06SOFIA647, BULGARIA'S MOST POPULAR POLITICIAN: GREAT HOPES,

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06SOFIA647	2006-05-09 10:04	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET//NOFORN	Embassy Sofia

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.bivol.bg/wlborisov.html>

<http://novinar.bg/?act=galleries&do=detail&rec=1&pic=10469#galblock>

Tim W Hayes 02/11/2009 11:09:57 AM From DB/Inbox: Search Results

Cable
Text:

S E C R E T NOFORN SOFIA 00647
CXsofia:
 ACTION: POLEC
 INFO: AID DCM FAS FCS DAO PAO AMB POLM RSO

DISSEMINATION: POLE
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: AMB:JBeyrle
DRAFTED: POLEC:Jsenior
CLEARED: DCM:Jlevine, POLEC:BFreden, POLMIL:PNemec, RSO:TBurkes

VZCZCSFI326
PP RUEHC RUEHZL RUEAIIA
DE RUEHSF #0647/01 1291004
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 091004Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1871
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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SUBJECT: BULGARIA'S MOST POPULAR POLITICIAN: GREAT HOPES,
MURKY TIES

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle, for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Sofia Mayor and former Interior Ministry General Boiko Borisov has stormed onto the national political scene in recent weeks, founding a new movement that has quickly become the most popular political force in the country. Borisov has denied rumors that he will be a candidate for president in this fall's elections; he seems instead to have his eye on the more powerful post of prime minister, and has publicly said that he does not want to see the current coalition government serve out its term. Borisov has cooperated closely with the Embassy on law enforcement in the past and, publicly at least, remains strongly pro-American. However, Borisov has been implicated in serious criminal activity and maintains close ties to LUKoil and the Russian embassy. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Borisov was elected mayor in November 2005, after overseeing the nation's law enforcement agencies as Chief Secretary of the Interior Ministry from 2001-2005. He catapulted to fame in that job, personally leading raids against drug traffickers and car thieves and gaining near-heroic status in the media as Bulgaria's top crime-fighter. Borisov, who once described himself as "Bulgaria's biggest asset," appeals to the public with his plain yet colorful language, unpretentious behavior, and sharp criticism of the country's political elite. He is the most popular political figure in the country, having maintained a consistent approval rating of over 60 percent for the past five years despite a mixed record against organized crime at the Interior Ministry.

Something like a Phenomenon

¶3. (C) On March 27, the Sofia City Court announced the registration of a Borisov-linked association called "Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria." Though awkward-sounding to the English ear, the group's name was carefully chosen to reflect a balance between patriotism and pro-European values. Its reference to Europe distinguishes it from the anti-EU extremist party ATAKA, while the group's Bulgarian acronym "GERB," by which it is commonly known, means "shield" or "coat-of-arms" and has a strong patriotic connotation.

¶4. (C) Borisov is not a co-founder of GERB, or even a member -- officially, he remains focused on his duties as mayor. In practice, he serves as GERB's public face and has traveled across the country giving speeches at GERB events and inaugurating new chapters. His efforts have been well received; the five week-old "citizens' association" has leapt to the top of the national polls. In a survey released April 24, 22 percent of respondents said they would support "the party of Boiko Borisov" if parliamentary elections were held immediately. The Socialist-led Coalition for Bulgaria, which won first place in last fall's elections, came in second with 19 percent.

¶5. (C) GERB's meteoric rise has siphoned away support from the radical nationalists of ATAKA, whose rating fell to 7 percent, off a high of 11 percent in January (septel). GERB has also attracted supporters of center-right opposition parties, which in recent years have become too divided by personality conflicts among their leaders to offer any meaningful counterweight to the ruling coalition. Borisov's

nationalist, "tough-guy" credentials, pro-European rhetoric, and populist style have led many political observers to consider him the only man who can unite the Bulgarian right.

¶6. (C) Borisov has done little to disabuse them of this notion. In a recent meeting with the Ambassador, Borisov was dismissive of other right-wing parties, stating that he "would destroy" ATAKA, and that the National Movement for Simeon the Second (NMSS), with whom he was once affiliated, "is melting." If he were to ally with anyone, he said, it would be with the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), the right-wing party which ruled Bulgaria through much of the nineties. The party, which currently polls at less than 5 percent, "is finished" in Borisov's view, but he would still consider a partnership, if only "to keep the brand" alive.

¶7. (S/NF) The timing and tactics of the Mayor's next move remain unclear, but recent statements hint at the direction he will take. A May 2 interview in the high-circulation daily "24 Chasa" appeared under the headline quote: "This coalition should go home early." In a recent conversation with us, Borisov was more direct, saying bluntly, "I will bring down the government after the basing agreement is completed."

An Influential Ally on Basing

¶8. (S) Borisov has repeatedly assured us that he supports close relations with the United States, including the basing of U.S. troops on Bulgarian soil. In a May 5 op-ed, he described the signing of the Defense Cooperation Agreement as a foreign policy "win" for Bulgaria, stressed the advantages of joint training and U.S. investment, and called on basing opponents to "hold their tongues in consideration of the national interest." However, Borisov has occasionally strayed off-message, particularly when trying to make hay from the government's unpopular handling of the initiative. Speaking in Haskovo on April 5, he told a crowd of hundreds that he personally supported basing U.S. troops in Bulgaria, but went on to describe the government's failure to subject the basing issue to a national referendum as a "fundamental blunder." Comments in a later interview were harsher; "On Iraq (the government) said that they would withdraw our troops immediately. They didn't withdraw them; they sent another brigade there. They gave the Americans bases without getting anything in return." A letter from the Ambassador to Borisov taking strong issue with these comments had the desired result -- the Mayor has refrained from further criticizing the government on this issue, and issued the May 5 op-ed (repeating large sections of the Ambassador's pro-basing arguments verbatim) in order to clarify his support for the joint bases.

Bio: From Fireman to "Batman"

¶9. (S) Born on 13 June 1959, Borisov grew up in Bankia, an outlying district of Sofia, where he was involved with petty gangs and gained a reputation as a neighborhood tough. After finishing high school, he attended the Interior Ministry Higher Institute (Bulgaria's main academy for police and security services) and graduated in 1982 with a degree in Firefighting Equipment and Fire Safety. He was reportedly denied entry into the Military Academy and more elite faculties of the MoI academy because his grandfather had been executed in a 1950s communist show trial. After graduating, Borisov, who holds a black belt, became coach of the national karate team before joining the Sofia police force as platoon commander and later company commander. From 1985-1990 he worked at the Interior Ministry Institute and was granted a doctoral degree in "Psychological and Physical Training of Operatives."

¶10. (C) After the end of one-party rule, Borisov went into business. He founded his own private security firm and built it into one of the biggest in the country at a time when "private security" was synonymous with extortion and

strong-arm tactics. In the 1990s he served as personal bodyguard to late communist dictator Todor Zhivkov (by then out of power), and was later hired to guard former king Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha during the ex-monarch's private visits to Bulgaria. When Saxe-Coburg returned to Bulgaria permanently and was elected Prime Minister in 2001, he appointed Borisov as Chief Secretary of the Interior Ministry -- a post that Borisov built into the most powerful law enforcement position in the country. In addition to traditional law enforcement agencies, Borisov oversaw the National Border Police, the Customs Service, and the National Security Service, which is responsible for counter-intelligence and counter-terrorism.

¶11. (S/NF) Borisov promoted himself shamelessly as Chief Secretary, skillfully combining influential connections with media owners and Hollywood-perfect press instincts to ensure the favorable coverage that his image is built on. Dubbed "Batman" for his brooding presence, penchant for black designer clothes and sudden appearances on crime scenes, Borisov built a PR machine that won him broad support from all age and social groups. Journalists tell us privately that Borisov pays cash for positive coverage and threatens those who report negatively on him. His tenure saw him hailed as "Sheriff of the Nation" despite at least 123 organized crime-related assassinations and no arrests of major OC leaders. To his credit, Borisov broke new ground in cooperation with U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and orchestrated numerous arrests of drug traffickers, counterfeiter and human traffickers. He has attempted to use these ties for his own ends, often boasting of his close relationships with Western security services generally, and U.S. services in particular. His regular meetings with representatives of the Russian Embassy receive less publicity.

¶12. (S) In private conversation, Borisov presents himself as almost violently anti-Communist -- an epithet he applies to the contemporary Bulgarian Socialist Party as well as the former regime. He often refers to his grandfather's death at the Communists' hands and rails against the leading role played by scions of "old Communist families" such as PM Stanishev, Chief Prosecutor Velchev and Parliamentary Speaker Pirinski. Borisov is street smart but often appears politically naive, as when told us he expects direct American support for his political career as a sign of our appreciation for his cooperation. His high energy level and short attention span sometimes lead him to pace like a caged tiger. He is exceptionally thin-skinned when it comes to public or private criticism.

The Dirt

¶13. (S/NF) Accusations in years past have linked Borisov to oil-siphoning scandals, illegal deals involving LUKoil and major traffic in methamphetamines. Information from SIMO tends to substantiate these allegations. Borisov is alleged to have used his former position as head of Bulgarian law enforcement to arrange cover for criminal deals, and his common-law wife, Tsvetelina Borislavova, manages a large Bulgarian bank that has been accused of laundering money for organized criminal groups, as well as for Borisov's own illegal transactions. Borisov is said to have close social and business ties to influential Mafia figures, including Mladen Mihalev (AKA "Madzho"), and is a former business partner of OC figure Roumen Nikolov (AKA "the Pasha").

¶14. (S/NF) Borisov has close financial and political ties to LUKoil Bulgaria Director Valentin Zlatev, a vastly influential kingmaker and behind-the-scenes power broker. Borisov's loyalty (and vulnerability) to Zlatev play a major role in his political decision making. The Mayor has engaged LUKoil in a number of public-private partnerships since taking office: LUKoil has agreed to donate asphalt for the repair of city streets, take on the upkeep of a Soviet Army monument, and finance construction of low-income housing. In a reciprocal gesture, Borisov has advocated using municipal

land to develop new LUKoil stations. Though this may seem a significant quid-pro-quo, Borisov's public agreements with LUKoil are only side deals in his much deeper and broader business relationship with Zlatev, which has been reported in other channels.

Comment: Implications for U.S. Interests

¶15. (S/NF) Boiko Borisov is an unpredictable individual with unbridled political ambition and an apparently bright future in Bulgarian politics. He may be capable of making good on his threat to bring down the current government, though not without political allies from within the ruling coalition. In any case, few people expect him to move before the November presidential election and Bulgaria's planned accession to the EU on January 1. Borisov voices strong support for close relations with the United States, and is in a position to advance some American interests in this country. His clear appeal to nationalist voters may occasionally bring him into conflict with U.S. policies, but it is also an opportunity to promote a more positive image of the U.S. to the public at large.

16 (S/NF) Borisov's ego may provide our greatest leverage over him -- he craves international attention and particularly covets U.S. approval. We must continue to walk a fine line between being used by Borisov's publicity machine and alienating an exceptionally popular and seemingly pro-American politician who may emerge as Bulgaria's next leader. In other words, we should continue to push him in the right direction, but never forget who we're dealing with.
END COMMENT.

Beyrle